

# Forest Fact Sheet

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## *Some basic facts about forests*

### 1. What is a forest?

A forest is not just a block of trees. Traditionally, a forest is a result of natural processes forming a community of species, providing a significant canopy and covering a major area. Today, technically FAO considers an area as 'forested' when it has trees higher than 5 meters, with tree crowns covering more than 10% of the ground (canopy), which cover an area of at least 0.5 hectares. Using these criteria, forested areas include both natural forests (composed of indigenous tree species) and planted forests (stands that are established artificially such as rubber plantations). Other environmental institutions follow different sets of criteria.

Forests can be categorized as boreal, temperate, savannah and wet tropical; they can be lowland to alpine; mangrove, swamp or flood forest. They could be primary or secondary, based on age and level of disturbance. They could be classified as protection, production or conservation, based on how government is managing them for the benefit of society. There is the emerging recognition of cultural forests (ancestral domains), given the growing acknowledgment for how indigenous cultures have interacted with natural ecosystems over time and enhanced biodiversity, and have legitimate rights to formally manage natural resources.

Other related terms include agro-forests and forest plantations. Agro-forests are lands with trees intercropped possibly with shrubs, herbs or seasonal food crops. This management system is typical of many upland communities for livelihood purposes. Plantations are generally monocultures managed for commercial harvesting of wood, fruits and resins. Some environmental institutions do not consider plantations as forests.

### 2. How fast are we losing the world's forests?

The world has just under 4 billion hectares of forest, covering about 30% of earth's land area. Countries where forests cover 50%-100% of the land area include Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Japan, south Korea, Sweden, Slovenia, Tanzania, Sudan, Zambia, DR Congo and several others in central Africa (Figure 1).

Around 6 million hectares of natural forest are lost or modified each year, roughly the size of Ireland. Nine of the ten countries that hold more than 80% of the world's primary forest area lost at least 1% of this area from 2000-2005. The greatest losses over this five-year period were in Indonesia (13%), Mexico (6%), Papua New Guinea (5%) and Brazil (4%).<sup>1</sup>

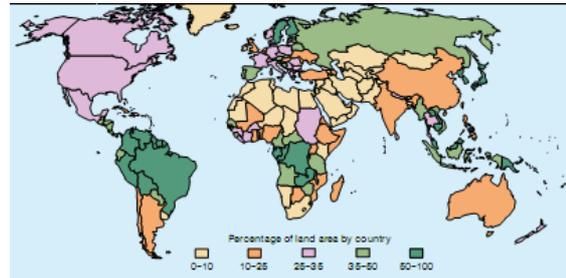


Figure 1. Forests as percentage of land area by country. (FAO 2007)

Almost half of Earth's original forest cover is gone, much of it destroyed within the past three decades.<sup>2</sup> Of all the regions, the greatest loss was in Asia. More than 70% of Asia's original forest has been wiped out, and much of this during the past century.<sup>3</sup> While progress is being made in countries with temperate climates and with developed economies, tropical forest ecosystems in Asia, Africa, central and south America are still declining.

### 3. Why are we losing our forests?

Major threats that have been identified are: industrial logging, clearing forests to give way to commercial planting of agricultural crops, and large-scale infrastructure projects that open once-inaccessible forests to intensive human activities.

Other activities that endanger forest ecosystems albeit on a smaller scale include: forest managers who suppress natural fires which help shape many frontier ecosystems, far-off factories that emit wind-borne pollutants harmful to trees, and exotic species introduced that can out-compete native plants and animals for scarce resources.

One emerging threat is the impact of global warming on forest ecosystems. Native species that cannot adapt or migrate to new habitats quickly enough die out rapidly as climate changes and new diseases, pest infestations, and natural disturbances increase as a result.

### 4. Who owns the world's forests?

Over 80% of the world's forests are publicly owned (Figure 2), which means that governments have control over who can use what resources in forest areas, for what purpose, for how long and under what conditions.

During the 1960s to 80s, governments tended to view forests as natural resources that could trigger economic growth in the short-term, not as a foundation for long-term rural livelihoods and an essential component for ecological services. Large tracts of forests were leased out to timber concessionaires during this period and cleared.

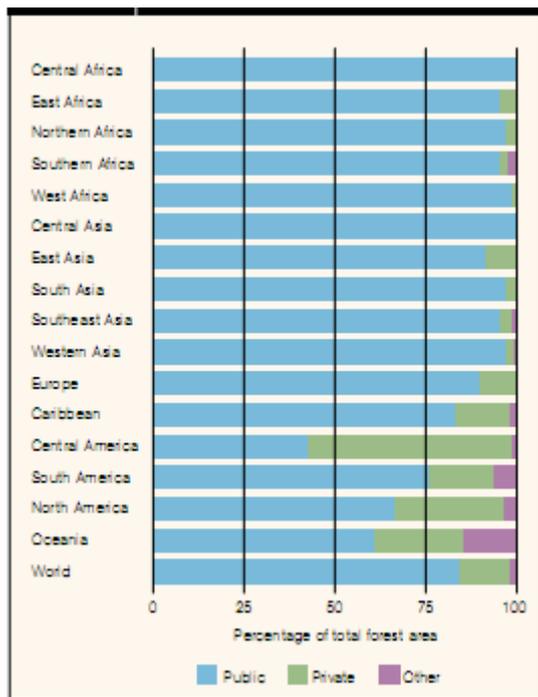


Figure 2. Ownership over forests by sub-region (FAO 2007)

The rapid and continuous trend in deforestation as well as the increasing social conflicts over resources in forest areas are prompting societies to seek other management modalities besides centralized control. As a result, several long-term trends are becoming apparent. In many countries, forest lands are being transferred from national control to local management (devolution). In Eastern Europe, there is a trend from public to private ownership (privatization). Awareness of the importance of having secure tenure over forest resources is increasing.

A number of countries have shifted institutional responsibility over forest resources from agriculture ministries to environment ministries, reflecting a shift in emphasis from the economic functions of forests towards ecological functions.

### *Impacts and risks*

The health of planet's remaining forests and the well-being of some of the world's poorest people are closely linked. Some 350 million of the world's poorest people depend almost entirely for their subsistence and survival needs on forests. A further one billion poor people – 20% of the world's population - depend on remnant woodlands, on homestead tree gardens, and on agro-forests for their essential food, fodder and energy needs. To these ends, they have a strong incentive to see these ecosystems are managed well.

And yet, the management approach in a number of nations, especially in the 1980s, was to move people out of the forests to achieve national conservation or production objectives in a certain area. This however created many issues especially in terms of human and cultural security.

Massive tree planting and reforestation programs, often

funded through loans, failed to bring back tree cover on degraded lands especially in Asia. Lessons from these programs show that one reason for the failure is that the design and implementation of these programs did not take into consideration the culture and basic needs of people reliant on these lands. Without the sense of ownership for the seedlings planted, there is little propensity to look after their growth.<sup>4</sup>

Forests should be providing for people and basic needs, but this has not been taken into consideration in modern history. The awareness that rural people can sustainably manage resources is only now coming to the fore.<sup>5</sup>

### *What we can do*

Sustainable and equitable management needs to be the goal of global society for forests because it is crucial to human and global survival. Many efforts are needed for society to change legal and policy frameworks as well as attitudes and capacities to make this transition happen, including:

- shifting forest institutions and management strategies from being sectorally defined, to that of taking from human development, biodiversity and ecological balance;
- monitoring land conversion and providing local people with a process for free and prior informed consent to any development being planned in their area;
- shifting attitude towards forest-dependent people – from that of being viewed as forest destroyers and treated as backward societies, to that of respect for the local knowledge gained over generations of interacting with the forest;
- promoting poverty reduction and human development for forest dependent communities;
- Supporting devolution of management rights and responsibilities and promoting local alliances that aim to achieve stability and sustainability in the land and seascape;
- Studying lessons learnt from previous forest programs as a basis for revising strategies and effecting changes
- Promoting agro-forestry systems in people's backyards;
- Assisting regeneration to restore natural forests;
- Greening the supply chain.

Forests reflect the largest area of land use change and human impact. They are essential to sustaining a biodiversity, maintaining the water balance, and to reducing climate change. They are crucial to the life of thousands of cultural systems, and to the daily subsistence of millions of the poorest people on earth.

<sup>1</sup> State of the World's Forests (UN Food & Agriculture Organization 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Last frontier forests: Ecosystems and economies on the edge (World Resources Institute, 1997)

<sup>3</sup> Communities and Forest Stewardship (Asia Forest Network, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> In search of Integrity: Looking After Basic Needs and Human Security in the Forests (Peter Walpole SJ, 2007), [www.asiaforestnetwork.org](http://www.asiaforestnetwork.org)

<sup>5</sup> Realizing MDGs, Restoring Forests (AFN 2007)